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YULETIDE THIRTY YEARS AGO

(Reminiscences of an Old-Timer, in which he Tells how Fort Edmonton Celebrated the Yuletide Thirty Years Ago.)

Thirty years ago! What fine memories of "le bon vieux temps" the phrase calls up to the old-timer of this live young centre, which has already set out to be a great city while picturesque fringes of the old fur-trading days still cling ot it! With the lapse of years only the bright colors stand out, and beyond that, there is the tender grace that attaches itself to every pleasant hour long past.

It would be difficult to make any old-timer believe that days were not happier then, that people were not more neighborly and warm of heart and that a friend's need was not more speedily met in the good old-times. And who that lives in this new Edmonton, which is a delightful hoi-polloi fresh from Eastern Canada and the old countries with a sprinkling of folk from the Western States, who would not concede that at least the old-times bred a fine type of men and women, strong, helpful, daring and warm of heart?

Thirty years ago there was no busy Jasper or checker-board of streets here. There was a house or two up on the white hill and over from it in the valley was the Big House and beyond this was the stockaded Fort. Now these isolated posts belonging to the Big Company were traditionally oases of cheer on the wide plains. They had been so for many years, and thirty years ago with the Hon. Richard Hardisty and his wife presiding at Fort Edmonton it was noted far

and wide for its delightful hospitality.

One old-timer undertook lately to recall the festivities of New Year's Day, which was the great gala day of the year at the Company's posts. The custom of celebrating the New Year was taken from both French and Scotch people, as these were the white races predominant in the west then.

The New Year's feasting began at midnight of the Eve, said this old-timer, with a salute from the three brass cannons down at the Fort. Their rumbling started the echoes of the Saskatchewan and often the half-breeds or Indians would fire a "feu de joie" from their guns to mark the birth of the New Year too.

These three guns stood on the river bank near the Scandal Bench, as old-timers called the bench 12 or 14 feet in length, built about the flagpost. This was the loafing-place, the rendezvous of gossips for the Fort, but with the New Year's salute all the memory of the scandal it is hoped, was buried in the river below. While the cannons boomed the old bell in the Fort bell-tower chimed out its welcome to the new, its God-speed to the old. And as daylight began to break the Indians and halfbreeds set out on their tour of greetings, saluting everybody, white or red, with a kiss and waiting then for a cup of tea or other refreshments.

It happened more than once that white men unused to the ways of the country would be surrounded in their beds by a bevy of Indian men and women--and it was a problem then how to serve the visitors with tea when they sat down

stolidly and forgot to go away to give the man a chance to get up and stir the fire and make the tea. All doors were left unlocked in those honest days, but a man once caught like this usually took the precaution on the following New Year's Eve to barricade his door from within.

In the morning the Chief Factor would hold a levee in the Fort, for the Indians in particular, and refreshments were lavishly distributed there. In the afternoon Fort Edmonton always saw an elaborate programme of sports carried out on the hill about the Big House, now Parliament Hill. Thirty years ago this programme was carried out on the hill-side arena covered by about a foot and a half of snow.

On this day one particular race stands out in the memory of the old-timer describing it. It was a race for the squaws, from the Big House down to the stockades of the Fort, and there were ten or fifteen entries. Stolid of form, with glowing coppery faces and short full skirts swirling about them--how they did run!

"And how that little squaw did run," the old-timer repeats, marvelling. "I never thought a woman could do it. She was like an antelope."

The prize she won was described on the programme as "A blow-out of pemmican," and after the race one of the clerks took a sack of pemmican, lopped off a chunk with an axe and sent the prize-winner away happy with the bundle in her shawl, and no doubt aware as any woman would be, of the glory of outdistancing her rivals.

In the race of eight or ten Indian men blindfolded, the man who started them twirled them so that they all faced the stockade, and at the end of the race they all came up uell-mell against the stockade to their own amusement perhaps as much as the spectators', for the Indian dearly loves a joke.

But for sheer fun the sack race for white men quite surpassed the others. There were six or eight entries, one of whom is now a well-known alderman. People shook in billows of laughter as the men tied in the sacks floundered through the snow. One newcomer, who later kept a well-known hotel here, thought it was part of the game to tip over the men in the sacks and help them up again. At least he said that was what he fancied as he saw them roll over and men rush to pick them up.

So he went close to this alderman of today and "shouldered"him. The future alderman rolled in the snow furious, and forgetting the race, demanded to be let out of the bag and after the man who had knocked him down. Before any serious set-to could occur, however, the runner had accepted the apologies of the offender.

Another enjoyable event of that afternoon was a tug-of-war between two teams of men captained by Col. Jarvis, of the Mounted Police and Major Stuart, the Indian agent. The latter had the heavier and stronger team. Likewise his men had the advantage of being down the hill toward the Fort while Jarvis' men were on the side of the hill--and still

his team made no progress. They could not draw their opponents one yard out of position. But as he moved about directing his men he had a suspicion. He ran behind his opponent's men, and there found the cause of their strength. It was not like Sampson's in their hair or anything but a turn of rope thrown by the anchor-man around a fence-pole outside the Factor's garden.

At night the festivities closed with a dance at the Big House accompanied by a lavish supply of refreshments. Apropos of the feast at the Big House that closed the day the old-timer narrating this took the occasion as so many of the old-timers--traders, missionaries and Indians--do, to pay a tribute of praise to Chief Factor Hardisty and his wife.

"It would be impossible," he said, "to find anywhere people occupying such a position to be more hospitable, or to make strangers' hearts so glad with their hospitality. They actually made life agreeable for everyone about the Fort, and if any man was in trouble he was sure to find a sympathizer in Mr. Hardisty or his wife. Indeed, I often repeat it. The death of Chief Factor Hardisty was a great loss to the people of this country."